

# Virgil's untold epics: narrative and perspective in the *Aeneid*

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Virgil's *Aeneid* often invites us to consider different perspectives on the events it narrates. Donncha O'Rourke introduces us to some of the sophisticated techniques Virgil uses in book 10 of his epic to illustrate that, depending on who sees Aeneas and how they react, alternative ways of interpreting the poem come to the fore.

## Aeneas returns to camp

A scene in book 10 of the epic juxtaposes two very different views of Aeneas: that is to say, Virgil changes the 'point of view' or 'focalization'. Turnus and his Latin allies have laid siege to the Trojan encampment in Aeneas' absence, but now the hero returns to bolster the defence. To the hard-pressed Trojans, Aeneas' return promises deliverance. When he raises aloft his flashing shield from the stern of his ship, they cheer and hurl their weapons upon their attackers with renewed vigour. But to Turnus and his allies Aeneas' return presents a very different picture:

*On the head of Aeneas there blazed a tongue of fire, baleful flames poured from the top of his crest and the golden boss of his shield belched streams of fire, like the gloomy, blood-red glow of a comet on a clear night, or the dismal blaze of Sirius the Dogstar shedding its sinister light across the sky and bringing disease and thirst to suffering mortals. (Aen. 10.270–5, trans. D. West)*

Here Virgil can only be presenting the perspective of Aeneas' foes, and sinister and terrifying is the impression he makes on them. The plumes of his helmet are as flames, and his flashing shield, which inspired such hope in the Trojans, 'spews'

fire (the Latin verb is *vomere*) like an ominous comet or the fever-bringing Dog Star. By focalizing Aeneas' return from different perspectives, Virgil is able to present a much fuller and more dynamic portrait of the Trojan hero.

## Alluding to Achilles

Yet there is more. The literary pedigree of the simile also adds to the effect because it calls to mind a similar description of Achilles in *Iliad* book 22 – the events of which took place not very long before those of *Aeneid* 10. There, the Trojans were similarly penned in their city, driven there by the Greek army and its newly returned hero, Achilles. Homer presents the perspective of Priam, whose son Hector will soon fall to Achilles in hand-to-hand combat:

*The aged Priam was the first of all whose eyes saw him [Achilles] / as he swept across the flat land in full shining, like that star / which comes on in the autumn and whose conspicuous brightness / far outshines the stars that are numbered in the night's darkening, / the star they give the name of Orion's Dog, which is the brightest / among the stars, and yet is wrought as a sign of evil / and brings on the great fever for unfortunate mortals. (Il. 22.25–32, trans. R. Lattimore)*

Homer leaves us in no doubt as to the old man's foreboding. Virgil has clearly recycled this famous simile in our passage of *Aeneid* 10, but he has also inverted it so that the perspective of the Trojans in Homer becomes the Latins' perspective on the Trojans in the *Aeneid*. Here, in miniature, we have an example of the wider pattern which sees Virgil's Trojans reverse their fortunes, becoming victors where once they were vanquished. The conversion of Priam's terrifying vision of Achilles into Turnus' terrifying vision of Aeneas draws attention to the competing viewpoints – of the winners and of the

defeated – from which a story can be told.

## Winners and losers

In *Aeneid* 10, then, the same moment – Aeneas' return to his camp – provokes some very different reactions, depending on the point of view. The *Aeneid*, as its title suggests, is predominantly the story of Aeneas. What kind of epic would we have if it were told from the perspective of Turnus?

The image of Aeneas belching flames from his helmet and shield is not the first of its kind in the *Aeneid*. On that same shield we know (because Virgil describes it in book 8) that the god Vulcan depicted scenes from the future history of Rome, including the victory of Octavian (the eventual emperor Augustus) at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.:

*High he stood on the poop of his ship while from his radiant forehead there streamed a double flame and his father's star shone above his head. (Aen. 8.680–1, trans. D. West)*

Here Octavian (the descendant of Aeneas) occupies an identical position to Aeneas, on the stern of his ship, when he comes to rescue his people in book 10. Fire 'spews' from Octavian's brow, too (again the verb in Latin is *vomere*). At Actium, however, the star is not Sirius, but that of Octavian's adoptive father, Julius Caesar: after his assassination in 44 B.C. there appeared a comet that was taken to be Caesar's soul on its way to the heavens. Octavian's appearance at Actium, then, is seen in an auspicious light – at least by his supporters. He is their shining deliverance, just as Aeneas is for the besieged Trojans in book 10.

It is important to remember, however, that the Battle of Actium was the last act of a civil war in which Octavian's victory will have been something to celebrate or to fear, depending on one's point of view. To his opponents, Octavian might have appeared at Actium as does Aeneas to the besieging Latins, or Achilles to Priam –

belching flames like an ominous comet or the fever-bringing Dog Star. What kind of Roman history would we have if it were told from the perspective of Mark Antony?

### Networks of imagery

The fire-imagery associated with Octavian and Aeneas in *Aeneid* 8 and 10, discussed above, is part of a wider network of parallels that makes the Trojan-Latin war a kind of legendary equivalent to the civil war that culminated at Actium. Earlier in book 8, Evander's account of the clash between Hercules and Cacus does something similar, in that it too can be read as a mythological parallel for what happens both later in the epic and later in Roman history – though in no straightforward way. Again the perspective is that of history's winners, and many are the parallels that associate Hercules with Aeneas and Octavian as saviours of their people. One detail, however, rather complicates this picture. In the heat of the battle, the fire-imagery is associated not with the victorious saviour, Hercules, but with the villain Cacus:

*There, as Cacus vainly belched his fire in the darkness, Hercules caught him in a grip and held him, forcing his eyes out of their sockets and squeezing his throat till the blood was dry in it. (Aen. 8.259–61, trans. D. West)*

It would appear that the motif of fire-belching (once more the verb in Latin is *vomere*) is associated not just with Octavian and Aeneas, but also with their apparent antitype, Cacus. It is difficult to know what to make of this untidy distribution of imagery. Some readers might say that Aeneas and Octavian convert the imagery associated with Cacus into something much more positive. For others, however, Cacus' fire-belching disturbs a positive reading of Octavian, as depicted at Actium later in the book, and of Aeneas, as depicted later in the epic.

### Interpreting the *Aeneid*

One response to this conundrum is to say that Virgil is once more drawing our attention to the different perspectives from which his story can be told. The narrative of Hercules' duel with Cacus is itself an unrelentingly triumphalist account – at least on Evander's telling: the 'good man' (Εὐανδρος) defeats the 'bad' (κακός). Some of Virgil's readers might have been surprised at his representation of Cacus as a fire-breathing monster; after all, Virgil's younger contemporary, the historian Livy, gives a version of the same story in which Cacus is merely a local shepherd – a fearsome cattle-rustler,

perhaps, but no monster.

Evander's unsympathetic view of Cacus might, therefore, be corrected – or narrated differently – by those with a different perspective. Similarly, whose evaluation of Octavian do we read in the description of Aeneas' shield? And when Aeneas lifts that same shield in *Aeneid* 10 as he returns to the Trojan encampment, do we share the perspective of the Trojans, or of the Latins? The possibilities for alternative perspectives do not simply open up the *Aeneid* for multiple interpretations; they remind us that there are other epics waiting to be told.

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